

So you want to breed livestock?

There's no instant remedy for success, says former Dutch fancier Paul Keen

I have since last Autumn been taking *Fur & Feather* again after an absence of a few years. From the age of 14 until we moved to France in 2003, I had wonderful years in this fine hobby, making many friends, seeing some of the great Judges in action then to talk and ask questions by the dozen.

I think some of the changes that have come in recent times are good, whilst some are not so good. Reading the columns of *F&F* and talking to friends, it seems that 21st century must have culture is entering this hobby, this wonderful hobby of ours, and when things do not go their way, it is have a go on the internet, declare the judge bent and so on and so forth – 'my rabbit has won for x amount of weeks so So & So had no right to win'.

There can be many reasons for this; perhaps it is time to take a look.

I have noticed that people have a number of breeds, rather than specialising in one breed and getting to the top with it. All breeds take a lot of understanding and have their own quirks with feeding, breeding and husbandry.

All rabbit breeds are a steep learning curve. Breeding stock is like the change of seasons, every day your stud changes and you have to be in tune with these changes.

With several breeds the chances of climbing the ladder of success and staying there becomes harder. Spotting the little differences, and reacting quickly to keep yourself ahead of the game, becomes harder.

I read in the judges reports in *F&F* their comments: "Thanks to my two or three stewards." When you see 20 to 50 exhibits in the grand challenge of a specialist club or local club's Fancy Challenge, where are all the people? Down the pub? Gone to a local attraction? Or just dropped their stock and returned home?

Stewarding is seen by many as something others do, not me.



The author with his black Dutch "Cheeky", winner of the Black Cup at the UK Dutch Young Stock Show 1991 plus the Greater London Dutch RC Shield for best Member

Well, in your early years in the hobby stewarding should be seen as an opportunity, not something other people do.

Use it as a tool. Take your chosen breed – where else do you get to handle your rival's stock, a chance for a discreet look and to see and compare your own efforts. Watching the judge handle, place and pick up on what are his/her likes and dislikes.

I hear you say, all judges judge to the same 100 point standard, and should select the same winner.

However, judges are human and have their pet likes and

dislikes. As an example, in Dutch the judge may prefer good top saddle to under cut. Both carry 10 points. A good top saddle is more pleasing to the eye, as out under can only be seen by the judge. By being at the table you learn what to give that judge, to give your stock the best chance in the class.

Stewarding will help because you rub shoulders with the experienced fancier, who will acknowledge you are doing your bit. This will lead to a conversation starting and for you to pose questions. This will lead to debate and knowledge gleaned, the start of an acquaintance, later a friendship and perhaps in time a visit to a leading stud's rabbit shed.

Paul (centre) stewarding at a UK Dutch stock show



All this for carrying a few rabbits back and forth. The secrets begin to unlock as you glean knowledge.

When your rabbit has won for three weeks on the trot and Joe Bloggs beats you in week four, perhaps your exhibit was not quite on song that day . . . looking jaded, just starting to break coat, so many reasons.

If you are there at the judging table you can see with your eyes. If you wish to ask the judges opinion, having watched the class being judged, you can ask the judge after judging for his/her comments. You can talk together constructively on the merits of the various points.

When judges don the white coat and go behind the table, friendships are put on hold: their sole task is to judge each exhibit to the best of their ability.

No matter how they arrive or leave the show, any judge that falls below that standard will be found out and will find themselves off the panel – quickly.

I came into the hobby when some fantastic names donned the white coat: Harry Brown, Harry Critchlow, Jack Power, Fred Fuller, Phil Stone, W.L.Webb and so on. These were the top performers and near professionals, travelling the country mostly by train. They loved talking and being open at the end of judging to take questions.

Today's judges have some big shoes to fill. They are there on merit, so glean information and use it in your shed.

There seems to be a downer on bought stock if the social network is to be believed. Comments like "I bought this, it cost a kings ransom, and I am not winning."

You have no right to win. When a breeder sets you up, he / she is just giving you the tools. It's a bit like mixing a cake, two people with the same ingredients get such different results. Well, livestock breeding is the same.

This is why if you want to climb the ladder: Watch Learn and Listen and the world will be your oyster. Buy good stock, be guided.

There are some outstanding books available from F&F on breeding and showing. Read them, digest them and enjoy. Then read them again and you will glean further golden nuggets of information.

Don't be afraid to return to where you bought your start up stock, for help and advice on how to solve problems that appear in the breeding pattern.

Take their advice on your stock. When you require something fresh they will probably tell you who to contact and if you are really lucky, make that introduction for you. Good breeders will get joy seeing you doing well on the show bench.

The high standard of stock in many breeds today is down to many dedicated generations of fanciers of the past. Well, now it is your turn to do your bit, for you to leave your mark on your chosen breed for the next generation.

If when your first set up stock is acquired you do not get the best stock available and this becomes apparent, then you are learning and it is down to you to do something about it.

Yes, the hobby has changed with the sad loss of many local clubs in certain areas, where many a great fancier learnt the basics. This is how I did it.

When I was 14 we had three clubs within an easy bus ride. My first show was in September 1968 at the Catholic hall in Ipswich. I had seen an article in the East Anglian Daily Times about a rabbit show. We had rabbits at home, but these were for the table.

Dad had to work so I caught an Eastern Counties bus into Ipswich and feeling quite nervous I walked into the hall.

Right in front of me was a Blue Dutch doe, she was so nice. After a while I asked about her and was taken to meet Margo Bridgeford, who told me she had been sold.

Mrs Bridgeford said she had a Blue doe at home surplus to requirements, it had belonged to the late Mr Norfolk. She told me that her home was at Barking Tye – 15 miles west of Ipswich, and the opposite way to my home in Martlesham.

I told Mrs Bridgeford that when Dad came to get me at 6pm, that I would ask if we could follow her home. I asked a million questions that afternoon and was invited back to the adult stock show in December.

Well, dad arrived and I pleaded with him to take me to see this blue doe. When we arrived it was fantastic, an L shaped garage with wall to wall cages plus a few outside for good measure. Me, I had arrived at heaven.

Mrs Bridgeford asked me how much pocket money I got each week. It was 2 shillings at the time. I added that I did a paper round and got another 10 shillings a week for that.

She announced that if I paid one week's paper money the doe was mine. She had two babies with her, both poorly marked bucks.

Dad said it was fair and the deal was done. When she was ready to be re-mated I took her to E.E. Garrod's champion buck. The buck sired two in the litter, one being 69B10890 who won many cups. By then the doe was quite old and had only three more litters.

Mrs Bridgeford invited me over to learn about the markings on the Dutch rabbit. It took two buses to get there and two back. She took me under her wing and was quite a force with her Steels and Blacks, winning at The UK Dutch shows regularly. I would exchange a mating for cleaning out her rabbits, or a ride to a show.

One Saturday when I arrived, she told me that she had spoken to my father and arranged for me to travel at half term on the

Wednesday up to see her good friend Muriel Morris who lived at Red Lodge Farm on the Sandringham Estate.

Miss Morris had a fine stud of mostly blue Dutch, her latest win had been 1 & 2 in the blue buck class at the UK Dutch.

The day came and I was so excited. Dad had given me £5 to buy one I liked.

When we arrived Mrs Bridgeford introduced me to Miss Morris, who took me outside to see her Stud in a horseshoe outside, in the middle of some bushes. You would not have known they were there.

Well I was told to find the best rabbit there. Wow, what an invite. I looked for three hours, then made my choice.

Miss Morris smiled when I told her, and said lunch was ready. We went inside and I asked so many questions that Bill Hunter her husband asked was it in the water in Suffolk.

After lunch Miss Morris had decided to give me the buck she had came 2nd with, plus a doe and five babies, two does and three bucks.

In the litter was a mismarked Black buck of super Type and colour, who became a super stud buck for many years.

The show blue buck bred breeding does, never a show rabbit, but back to the Black buck I got show specimens.

These two ladies took this question-asking lad under their wing and gave me a great grounding.

I went to Norfolk many times and after Bill died Miss Morris moved to their summer house at Hunstanton and gave up the farm, cutting down the rabbits some bit. I still visited and still asked questions for many a long year.

If you are as lucky as I was when I set out then you will have a great time in this hobby that has been around since the middle of the 19th century.

It needs dedicated fanciers who want to be in the fancy for the correct reasons. Because in time it will be your turn to help that new fancier and set them on their way.

Paul Keen

